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SUBJ: MEDIA REACTION: AFGHAN RUNOFF

¶1. SUMMARY: Nepal's newly launched but popular English daily Republica with an estimated 15,000 circulation ran an editorial "Afghan runoff" cautioning the international community to treat Afghan affairs with care lest the Taliban take over again. The English daily's sister vernacular daily Nagarik with an estimated 30,000 circulation also ran a similar editorial titled "Lesson from Karzai" in which the newspaper praised Karzai for accepting the election decision and keeping the country's interest ahead of his personal desires and commented that Nepali leaders can learn from his example. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Full text of Republica editorial: "Afghan President Hamid Karzai has finally agreed to hold a runoff election after the UN-sponsored independent audit declared that over one million votes, one-third of what he had received, were fraudulent bringing his total share of votes to below 50 percent. This prompted a runoff election under the Afghan constitution. But Karzai relented only to persistent international pressure, especially from the United States, a country that remains bogged down in the war in Afghanistan. US President Barack Obama kept his decision to send additional troops to Afghanistan on pending and US officials sent strong signals that the decision was tied up to whether Karzai accepts the results of the independent auditing. US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, called him and 'advised' him to act like a "statesman". UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner also kept the pressure boiling on Karzai. Finally, the US sent senator, Foreign Relations Committee chairman and 2004 presidential candidate, John Kerry, to do the final arm-twisting, leaving Karzai without an option but to relent."

¶3. "It's such a relief that a man who thought he could steal the election and get away with it has been forced to realize his limits. But the challenge of holding the runoff, in the chilling winter and rugged terrains of Afghanistan and that too within two weeks, is simply overwhelming. Add to this the menace of Talibans, who have lately been consolidating their force and gaining grounds. Managing the logistics, providing security to the Afghans, who risked their lives to cast their votes in the first round, is going to be an enormous challenge, if not impossible. No less easy will be to convince the Afghans to cast their ballots in the runoff, especially because their faith in the

electoral system -and democracy to some extent - has eroded to a significant degree. But then again, failure to hold the runoff is not an option for Kabul needs some semblance of legitimacy if this country is to pull off this brutal war and get rid of the insurgency. The NATO force, which is on the ground in Afghanistan, and which was perhaps in the know of what was coming, should gear up to face the challenge, provide poll security and help with logistics to hold a credible runoff."

¶4. "Afghanistan is too important a country -and not just for the US - to be left to fail. It will have immediate ramifications for Pakistan and then for India and the whole of South Asia. It's therefore the duty of the international community and the regional powers to make sure that the Taliban's don't take back the country and make it, once again, a sanctuary for terrorists. It's also equally important to ensure that elections cannot be stolen. Else, Afghans and many people around the world will lose faith in democracy."

¶5. Translated excerpt of Nagarik editorial "... Karzai has taken the right decision by stepping aside and trying to find a solution to the political stalemate in the country. Though the context is different, Nepal's leaders can learn a lesson from Karzai. The country has been in a political imbroglio because of the Maoists who have made civilian supremacy their agenda... At this point in time Nepal's political parties must show the flexibility and understanding that President Karzai did. And those in the government must be responsible and amenable. All know that there can be no way out of this without compromise and why delay that?"

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